

## Remarks by Council President Blair Ewing

December 4, 2001

On the completion of my term as Council President, I have some brief remarks about where we've been and where we appear to be headed.

First, I want to thank my colleagues for giving me the honor of allowing me to be Council President.

Together, we have worked on the considerable challenges facing us as a County – maintaining and improving our world-class school system, expanding transportation options for County families, providing services to the needy and vulnerable among us, and trying our best to strike the right balance between growth and development on the one hand and preserving our neighborhoods, the environment, and the quality of life we prize on the other.

These are no easy tasks. But we are the ones citizens choose and we are obliged to face and solve these problems. The County Council approves every dollar that's spent. We are the ultimate land use authority. We determine policy for the County. And we exercise oversight to make sure public moneys are well spent and that the job is being done right – the first time.

On a body of only nine members, there is – if I may paraphrase a Motown hit of the Sixties – “nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.” We are the branch of government closest to the people. That's why playing “follow the leader” and just crafting fine phrases won't take you very far, in contrast to what you might find at the state or federal levels.

We have accomplished much in the past year. And we have been tested as a County – as our whole nation has been tested – by the September 11 tragedy and its aftermath. When someone asks me where I was when I heard the news, I will recall that I heard the news in the company of my colleagues on the County Council.

And when I am asked my reaction to the County's response, it is one of great pride in our many public servants who bravely fought fires, saved lives, and brought us through this tragedy.

Whatever my differences –whether of style or of substance – with my colleagues this past year, I want to say that I respect each and every one of you and am honored to serve with you.

I also want to thank the Council staff as a whole – and my own personal staff in particular – for serving the County so splendidly over this past year. Those who

work here at the Council are without question among the “best and brightest.” I have worked in five federal agencies, one local government, and teams of analysts inside and outside government. I’ve seen none better than ours. They could work anywhere in either the public or the private sector – and many have done so, brilliantly – but they choose to serve the Council and the people of this County. On behalf of a grateful Council and County, I thank them.

“Be sure you’re right, then go ahead” was the motto of one-time US congressman David Crockett.

I’m proud this Council has “gone ahead” on a broad range of issues.

We have fuelled the lamp of learning for our children by funding reduced class sizes, more reading and math emphasis, and special attention to at-risk kids.

We have acted to promote more transportation options for County residents – options consistent with preserving our communities and our quality of life. We’ve reduced bus fares, boosted our transit incentives program, supported the Inner Purple Line and Corridor Cities Transitway, and seen our Norbeck Road Extended east-west route take shape.

To those whose knee-jerk answer to every problem is to bulldoze a little more green space – you know, the special interests who’d rather “pave the world” than “save the world” -- I would note the recent poll that shows only 1 percent of Montgomery Countians think the County is growing too slowly. And that, given the choice of transit versus more new roads, residents choose improved transit over more roads by 53 percent to 32 percent.

The last time I checked nobody was making any more land. That’s why we have to take care of what we have.

I’m proud we’ve worked to reduce the availability of guns in this County with my gun show legislation.

I’m proud we initiated and passed a law to require vendors to put tobacco products behind the counter – out of reach of young people.

I’m proud we stepped up to the plate in regulating indoor air quality. Just last Thursday, we had a briefing with our County health officer Dr. Carol Garvey on the serious problem of asthma in the County, especially among children. The problem of tobacco smoke in multifamily buildings was a particular concern.

“It’s a shame our new indoor air quality legislation won’t include tobacco smoke,” I observed. “It sure is,” she agreed.

You know what was strange? I didn't see the *Washington Post* or George Will or Rush Limbaugh or Court TV in the room to hear this. I guess they've moved on to other amusements.

Meanwhile, we'll pass a new bill which will effectively ban – yes, there's that word – ban -- parents of children with asthma from complaining to the County about excessive poisonous tobacco smoke – by exempting that substance from the law. What a shame.

The measure of decency in any society is what it does for the most vulnerable among us – our children and grandchildren, our older residents, those with health problems and those with disabilities.

I am most pleased that during the past year we have highlighted – and to some degree, although not as much as I'd like, addressed – the growing mental health crisis in our County. If state and county executives have given short shrift to this area, perhaps that is because health and human services improvements are not conducive to ribbon-cuttings or government-by-press-release -- or so easily characterized as part of a "legacy."

We must do better on mental health and senior services. We have 100,000 people in this County with no health insurance. Our emergency rooms at local hospitals are overcrowded. We must pay close attention to shortcomings in our programs for victims of domestic violence. As chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, I will continue to push for action on all of these issues.

During my year as Council President, I was heartened by letters, calls, and emails from folks who supported my leadership and advised me to "give 'em hell, Blair." That reminded me of the visit Harry Truman made to my small town in Missouri when he was just a Senator to visit my father, a local political leader. In the 1948 election, crowds would yell to Truman to "give 'em hell, Harry." His gleeful rejoinder always was "I just tell 'em the truth and they think it's hell."

We have tried a little truth-telling of this past year and I think we've moved forward on a number of different fronts. Again, I thank my colleagues for their support and I thank the residents of the greatest county in America for your trust.